

Sermon for Sunday, October 30, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's one of the great stories of the bible,
one of the most dramatic encounters
with Jesus
that is recorded in the gospels,
where simply meeting Jesus
seems to totally change
someone's life.
And it begins
with all the seriousness
of slapstick humor.

Jesus is coming into town, into Jericho,
one of the more important towns of its time
with a Roman garrison
and plenty of commerce, situated in the fertile bottomlands along the River Jordan
and only a day or two's walk
from Jerusalem.
And the word has gone ahead of him
and crowds begin to build.
Everyone
wants to be there.
And then Zacchaeus shows up.

He's a tax collector, and we've heard plenty about them
the last few weeks.
They are not universally loved; in fact, they are universally hated
first, for collecting taxes on behalf
of the occupying superpower, Rome,
and second,
for charging extra
to line their own pockets.
Overheads, they call them,
but everyone else knows it as gouging.
All in a city
where the Romans have a garrison,
so that the cost of their presence

is constantly in people's faces.

And Zacchaeus
isn't just any old tax collector;
he is a chief tax collector.
So not only does he collect taxes for the Romans,
he collects taxes
from the other tax collectors,
another layer of 'overheads.'
So Zacchaeus
isn't exactly popular among his peers,
let alone the rest of the community.

And so here comes Jesus,
and Zacchaeus decides
that he wants to see him.
But
there are no tickets to be bought.
And no one is going to go out of the way
to give him pride of place
along the road.
He's just like everyone else,
battling
to get the best place
to see this wonder worker.
And it doesn't help
that he's shorter than average,
so for him,
it's a matter of be in the front row,
or miss out
altogether.

And so here is that self important little man
pushing and shoving,
trying to get to the front of the crowd
to see Jesus,
and everyone else,
sick of him
constantly expecting
to have the prime position,

doing their best
to block his way.

Until eventually
he realizes that
he is never going to get to the front
and the only way
that he might even get to see Jesus
is to find a place
that no one else
has thought of.

And he looks around
and sees, up ahead
a tree.

Its huge multiple trunks
twisted together at the base
and then spreading out into wide
low
branches.

And Zacchaeus looks around,
realizes that everybody else
is looking down the road to where Jesus is about to appear,
and pushes back out of the crowd,
runs to the tree,
tucks his cloak into his belt,
hoists up his tunic,
kicks off his shoes,
and begins to climb.

And finally finds
a comfortable branch
just high enough
that he can see over people's heads
but appropriately thick with leaves
so that no one will be able to see
the lengths a prominent man like himself has to go to
to get a glimpse of the teacher,
and settles there
to wait for Jesus to pass.

And Jesus comes on down the road,
forced to stop every so often
by the hands reaching out to him,
and the people pushing forward to talk to him,
and slowly he makes his way through the town
until he comes close to the tree,
and suddenly he looks up, peers through the leaves,
and in a loud voice says,
“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

“What?” thinks Zacchaeus. “But I’m up here,
and no one was supposed to see me,
and now everyone’s looking at me
and I have to get down, and...and he wants to come stay with me?”

And he pulls his tunic close around him,
and shimmies over to the trunk
and half climbs, half slides
down,
and untucks his cloak
and shoves his feet in his shoes,
and tries to reclaim his dignity.

And as Zacchaeus and Jesus
turn towards Zacchaeus’ house
the grumbling begins.
“Who does he think he is?
And doesn’t Jesus know?
I thought he’d want to stay one of the priests,
or perhaps the mayor.
Or one of the old families in town.
That Zacchaeus is no good.”

And it seems
that perhaps their grumbings
have drowned out
whatever conversation
Jesus and Zacchaeus
were having.

Because the story, the way Luke tells it,
seems to be missing something here.
Surely something
just have happened
to take Zacchaeus from being someone who wanted to see Jesus
to someone
who would be willing
to give away half of everything
he owned
and to give back four times the amount
of anything he had taken illegally.
He was willing to be bankrupted,
all because Jesus
came to visit.

And there's another gap
between Zacchaeus saying that
and Jesus' response.

Jesus says

"Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Again

it seems like a non sequitur.

It's as if we only have
part of the conversation.

Think of the other times
Jesus has conversations like this.
There's his encounter with the rich young man,
just half a chapter before this one.

The man asks
what he has to do to receive eternal life.

Jesus tells him
to follow the ten commandments,
and, when the man says he's done that,
Jesus tells him to sell everything he has
and give it to the poor.

And the blind man,

sitting in the roadway when Jesus came into Jericho,
he calls out to Jesus for healing.
And Jesus asks him what he wants
before healing him
and telling him
that his faith has made him whole

But Zacchaeus,
Zacchaeus doesn't plead for anything.
He makes no great statements of faith.
He just wants to see Jesus
and then allows Jesus
to invite himself
for dinner.
This is one of the classic stories
taught to children,
and I suspect we think
that we know well.
And yet, when you read it carefully,
it raises all sorts
of questions.

It makes me wonder
about how we respond to Jesus
coming among us.
Are we already convinced
that we have a right
to the front row.
Or are we eager to see him,
doing anything we can
to get a full view?
Even if that means doing something
outrageous,
something that might cost us our dignity,
might lead to us
being ridiculed by others.
Do we count being respectable
as more important
than seeing and following
Jesus?

And what if Jesus
were to invite himself
to eat with us?
Would we make excuses,
that we are too busy,
that we don't have time to make things ready?

And when we meet Jesus
how do we respond?
Are we willing to have an honest heart to heart with him about our lives,
including our finances?

And when someone
who we wouldn't expect
hears Jesus' call, someone
that we might think of
as unworthy,
or perhaps just
not quite like us,
what do we do then?
Do we try to block them,
assuming
that we have the right for front row seats
and they have no rights at all?
What if Jesus has called out to them
and invited himself
into their lives?
How do we become not barriers to Christ
but doorways?

You see, the thing is
that Jesus is here.
Jesus has come among us.
Not just once two thousand years ago
but today
and every day
through his spirit.
And Jesus is just waiting for us
to notice him.

To look for him.
To spend time with him.
To have a heart to heart with him.

And every time we celebrate the Eucharist
we share a meal with him.

Isn't that incredible?

Here we are, two thousand years later,
and Jesus offers to share a meal with us
every week.

So do we take advantage of that?

Or are we too busy?

And finally,
how do we respond?

Are we willing
to respond to Jesus
with gratitude
and generosity?

To share what we have
with those who need it most?

To give of our finances
and of ourselves
to support Jesus' work in the world today?

Will we hear the words
that Zacchaeus heard,
'Today salvation has come here.'